



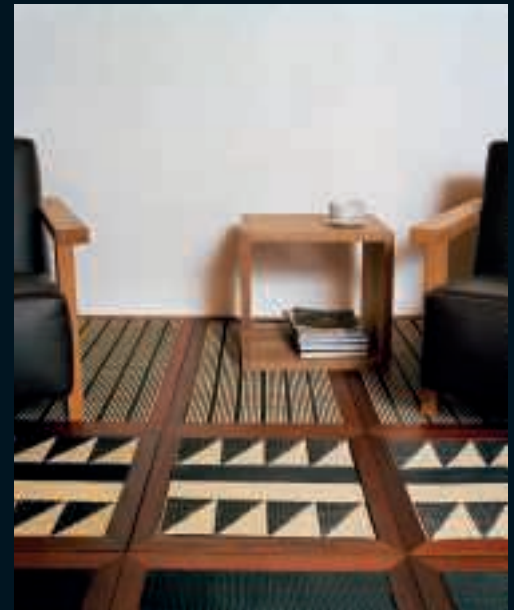


‘We don’t claim to have all the answers.’ That quotation is lifted from a piece of sales literature – and is so unbelievably refreshing. The competitive process of business is what it is, but sometimes, just sometimes, it’s good to hear a company reining in the bravado and showing a bit of humility.

We are all bombarded every day with information about the damage we are doing to the environment and to developing societies. Hand wringing, guilt tripping and finger pointing vie with greenwashing, cynicism and Al Gore for centre stage in a production of grotesquely confusing proportions. Thank goodness for an organisation that publicly admits that it doesn’t have all the answers, acknowledges that certainties are thin on the ground – and states, on the record, that they are at the beginning of a much bigger process.

Don’t know about you, but we’re inclined to listen to people who are trying to make a difference, and at the same time admit to making mistakes while learning on the job. ▶

fair and just





► We're chatting to Karin Laljani and Miriam Turner of InterfaceFLOR about the FairWorks concept, and Just™ – its first product range. What FairWorks attempts to do is combine the best environmentally friendly processes it can manage with social responsibility and integrity. This is not charity, this is not aid – this is business, as Karin and Miriam stress from the start.

'My key interest is innovation: research, conceptualisation and taking the innovation to market,' explains Karin Laljani, Senior VP at InterfaceFLOR responsible for Market Strategy and Sustainability. 'Sustainability is at the forefront of our corporate strategy, and it's a passion of mine as well – to discover, on joining InterfaceFLOR, that sustainability has a very positive impact on generating innovative designs and ideas was a nice surprise. Sustainability is full of possibilities and not a constraint. It's also the right way to do business – whether or not we are the cause of climate change and economic imbalance, should we not attempt to reverse the negative trend if we can?'

'We've focussed our sustainability approach primarily in the areas of waste, water and emissions reduction. The focus on social aspects of business had been less prominent, though it has equal weight in our view on sustainability. So, four years ago, I set myself and the team the challenge to include social integrity into product design. The aim is to deliver an almost perfect business model for our 'Mission

Zero' strategy – our 2020 vision to leave next to no socially environmentally negative impact and beyond that to deliver restorative, positive impacts.

'Next we set up an Innovation Pipeline with the aim of continuously producing commercially competitive flooring products which have to be true to the principles of Mission Zero. A Sustainability Index is helping us to determine if we are on the right track. We set up an Innovation Network with external contributors such as designers, chemists, marketing specialists,

bio-thinkers, teachers and product developers who all had one thing in common – an interest in sustainable design. Through the three years it has taken to develop the FairWorks concept, and the Just product range, I have had full support from our CEO Lindsey Parnell, but no favours from an investment perspective. A key facet of sustainability is economics – a business case is always required: FairWorks was no exception. I often get the comment that it must be easier at InterfaceFLOR to get funding for projects with a sustainability objective because of our ethos, but that is absolutely not the case. During board meetings you would hear 'Karin, we are not a charity' when introducing the FairWorks idea. It raised questions for us like 'What is our position in relation to a commercial organisation taking responsibility for generating income and alleviating poverty?' – and that's a question we are still debating.

'My team and I ran into a brick wall in the company during the first couple of years. Rightly so: until we could prove that we had a beautiful product, which meets customer needs and which we could successfully make and market, then it would be considered charity. There is nothing wrong with being charitable but it does not constitute a business model in itself.'

The FairWorks concept was and is challenged by a vast quantity of issues and dilemmas. The basics of design variety, durability and flexibility based on locally sourced natural materials are troublesome for a company that makes 99% of its products on a tufting machine, and acknowledges that weaving and natural





► materials are outside its area of expertise. Add to that the problem of building a business with having a little certainty of and agreement on the outcome in terms of the combined targets of business growth and support of the Tamil Nadu community. What about convincing colleagues, customers and shareholders that reaching out to a developing economy is the right way to prioritise resources? What about the risk of negative impact on the InterfaceFLOR brand, built on years of producing reliable, dependable, repeatable products?

Miriam Turner, Innovation Projects Manager, takes up the story, explaining in detail how the FairWorks concept came to fruition in its first iteration – Just. ‘We’ve got a great track record in reducing our footprint, but there was too little focus on social responsibility. It’s hard to define eco design – but it’s not just about being green, a holistic approach is needed. To integrate a green product with social responsibility is our Nirvana – and we admit that out of 10, FairWorks today scores only a seven or eight. For example, Just is made locally in India, sourcing local materials, but we have to ship it by sea to get the product to our customers in Europe. It’s only as good as it can be today. From the beginning we’ve known that we are in for a rough ride and it isn’t a 12 month project.

‘We based the process on the Sustainable Livelihoods Business Model, established by The World Council for Sustainable

Development which is all about doing work with high social and economic value. We were keen to progress the ideas, but had to ask ourselves how a product can have social integrity.

‘We arranged design developments workshops to work through local concepts, and came up with about four or five ideas that could conceivably result in a product. We worked closely on the workshops with Neils’ Peter Flint of Experience Design Lab (EXDL), who has spent 20 years developing sustainable design concepts – and one of the

people we invited to brainstorm the concepts was Neelam Chhiber of the Industree Craft Foundation.’

‘Predominantly based in Southern India, Industree develops and promotes Indian craft by forming a link between the crafts people from small villages and businesses and customers around the world, the whole point is to help local people generate the income, skills and materials to become self sufficient. The Workshop explored the innovative use of natural fibres, and Industree had the infrastructure and skills in ►



► place. The first product to be developed under the FairWorks umbrella is Just.

'FairWorks is based on three core points,' says Miriam. 'First, the product must be made from locally available materials – and we are learning all the time about the potential of different materials. Second, FairWorks is based on craft skill. Handicrafts cannot realistically compete with factories, which result in damage to the local community's fabric. What FairWorks attempts to do is to work with and maintain the local culture. We're trying to create a fusion – and produce a global product not an ethnic product. There's a huge wealth of skill but equally a huge unemployment problem. This is about aligning with industry, contemporising traditional crafts and providing channels to market. The third point is that this is about income generation. We're not starting yet another charity, it's not aid, this is a business!'

A design development workshop in Bangalore started to tackle the key product issues in Just – simply put, the main question was how to connect all the materials and textures. The challenge was to integrate a hand-crafted piece within a precision engineered product. Industree work with about a hundred producer groups of various materials. They worked with EXDL to produce samples for review by an A&D focus group. After review by the innovation network and market testing sessions around Europe, Just was close to finalisation. A modular frame connection system was developed to hold the natural fibre insert, a palette of natural colours were reviewed, with a black and natural collection ultimately selected. After four years Just was ready to market.

Karin, in her inimitable way, sums up the process. 'Just is a high end crafted product, make no mistake. It's not purely decorative either. You can stand on Just, as it passes the light to medium contract standard. We aim to sell Just successfully. This is about business, real sustainable business. Along the way we've made five steps forward and one step back – and so be it. All we know is we've done it. All we know is we've done it the best way we can.' ●

